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ABSTRACT

A description is given of the development and implementation of the BLOCK Schedule Program, which provides an alternative format to the traditional high school schedule and has a time frame similar to that of a summer school schedule. The target population was high risk students at the sophomore and junior levels. Students attend BLOCK classes for 3 hours a day and complete a semester course in four and one-half weeks. They earn a semester credit with that course and move on to another block subject for the next four and one-half week unit. The courses taught in the first semester included blocks in English, algebra, biology, and physical-health education. This report describes specific program features and the results from the first year of operation. (JD)

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BLOCK

Successful Alternative Format

Addressing Learner Needs

Presentation

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BLOCK -

SUCCESSFUL ALTERNATIVE FORMAT

ADDRESSING LEARNER NEEDS

BACKGROUND

The BLOCK Schedule Program, which was piloted in the fall 1987 semester, provides an alternative format to the traditional high school schedule. Its time frame has similarities to that of a summer school schedule. A proposal submitted to the Innovation Center during the summer of 1986 reflected that many students who have difficulty throughout the regular school year and who are considered high risk students are very successful in summer school. The possibility of implementing an academic year schedule which was in some ways similar to a summer school schedule was the focus of the proposal submitted to the Innovation Center. The target student population was to be high risk students at the sophomore and junior levels.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

The research and development of the BLOCK schedule concept took place during the 1986-87 school year and extended into the summer of 1987. A review of the research regarding alternative scheduling programs, particularly block schedules, was conducted. In the review of the literature, no other alternative schedule similiar to the one proposed to the Innovation Center was in place in any public school system. The limited references which were found about time-block schedules pertained primarily to junior colleges.

One form of a BLOCK schedule program was identified in San Dieguito School District in California. Classes were organized in a rotating block format. On alternate days, the odd numbered classes (periods 1, 3, 5) would meet. The next day the schedule "rotated" and even numbered classes were held. Each class met for two hours a day.

Satisfaction with that program varied between schools within the district but was generally high. Some insights into the advisability of a summer school type block program on a system wide basis were obtained. A block schedule program could have positive benefits for students and teachers. However, a major consideration of a school-wide block program as proposed in this Innovation Center project was the impact on the mobile student.

Once the background research had been completed, the planning of program specifics occurred. An early concern was the development of a program which could result in a labeling of the high risk students as incapable. It was agreed that the program should be one into which students traditionally considered as high risk could be placed and also that the program should not be designed to exclude students who are not considered to be at risk of dropping out of school.

Students attend BLOCK classes for 3 hours a day and complete a semester course in 4 1/2 weeks. They earn a semester credit with that course and move to a different block subject for the next 4 1/2 week unit.

Initially it was decided that the pilot would include only one block of four classes. Those classes would be integrated into the traditional schedule during the pilot phase of the project.

Block Schedule teachers would be teaching one 3-hour block class plus one additional class. This resulted in two planning hours per day - one for the traditional schedule class and one for the block class. This additional planning hour requires no additional funding. Due to the structure of the Block Schedule Program, teachers would still teach 5 classes during the semester and carrying the same student load as teachers in the traditional program. This additional planning hour would be very helpful to teachers in planning for the three hour class period. Teachers would be able to have a common planning hour to discuss block program specifics and they share information about students. Time for contact with parents on a regular basis was also provided for by this additional planning hour.

LEGAL REQUIREMENTS

Arizona laws require that classes must be scheduled for a minimum of 60 hours a year in order for a class to qualify as a credit course. Independent study classes are exempt from this limitation. In a 176-day school year, courses are scheduled to meet approximately 88 days per semester. The block classes are scheduled to meet between 63 and 72 hours each depending on holidays. This time frame exceeds State minimum requirements based on 45 minute class hours.

The Arizona Interscholastic Association was notified of the Block Program scheduling so as not to jeopardize the eligibility of students enrolled in the block schedule. AIA regulations are based upon semester and course completion requirements. Therefore, the block program would not create any eligibility problems for students.

TEACHER AND COURSE SELECTION

Teachers were recruited to participate in planning specifics of the program schedule and course selection. A great deal of interest and enthusiasm were present. From a group of 8-12 teachers, four were identified as teachers for the pilot.

A student survey conducted in the spring of 1987 indicated considerable interest for a block schedule format. The survey also indicated that the program would need to include at least two grade levels. Juniors and sophomores were identified as the classes to be served in the pilot. Courses were selected which would fulfill general graduation requirements for these levels.

The courses to be taught first semester included:

Stride (Chapter I) English, English 10 and English 11
Introduction to Algebra, Algebra, Intermediate Algebra
Biology, Conceptual Physics
Decisions, Physical Education, Health/Drivers Education

In 1988-89 course offerings have been extended to include U.S. Literature, U.S. History, World History/Geography, Spanish 1-8, Free Enterprise and Entrepreneurship.

STUDENT SELECTION

In the first year the primary target population was high risk students. As the characteristics of high-risk students were discussed by the planning group, a concept of traditional and non-traditional riskness emerged. Traditional characteristics of high risk students included poor academic performance, attendance problems, discipline problems,

mobility, limited decision-making abilities, excessive work hours, low socio-economic status, English language difficulties, and chronic medical problems.

Students who may also be considered at risk by non-traditional criteria included students who are unchallenged, have physical limitations, are overcommitted, are loners, have poor peer relationships, or may be under excessive parental or self pressure.

Finally, in keeping with the desire to establish a program which would work well for high risk students but not result in negative labeling, the program was opened to any student who requested involvement.

In the second year, BLOCK was marketed as an accelerated program. Positive recruitment by BLOCK students brought a cross section of enrollees. Projection for 1989-90, additional courses will serve senior level students.

Specific students are identified through a combination of procedures. The pool of potential enrollees included students expressing interest through the spring survey, students identified through traditional at risk criteria, students whose parents requested their inclusion in the program, students who requested enrollment in block classes, and students identified by teachers, counselors, or administrators. BLOCK serves mobile students as entry in that a "new" semester each month is positive for those coming into the school.

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

Teachers were provided with time during the summer to discuss the program, its goals, and their concerns about this type of program. Time was also provided for curriculum revision. Administrator assistance to the teachers was important to acceptance and curriculum revision. The Innovation Center provided funding for these activities.

Once students were identified and schedules arranged, meetings were held with parents and students to clarify the program schedule and requirements as well as to address student and parent questions. Students and parents were required to sign a statement of understanding about the program prior to enrolling in the class. This was important for two main reasons. The first is that a single day's absence of a block class is the equivalent of three days absence in a traditional class. Secondly, students moving out of the block program during the semester would very probably have difficulty enrolling in programs elsewhere which could jeopardize progress towards graduation.

EVALUATION COMPONENT

Due to the nature of this course and its development as an Innovation Center project, an extensive evaluation was planned. Subjective feedback from parents, teachers, and students was collected. Attendance and grade comparisons were made. Changes in student self-concept as measured by the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale was also measured. Of interest also was the use of a wider variety of instructional methods in the 3-hour BLOCK than occurs in a traditional schedule course.

RESULTS FROM FALL 1987

Enrollment and Withdrawal Information

During the fall 1987 semester 131 students participated in the BLOCK schedule program at Amphitheater High School. A total of102 of the students started in August.

The remaining 29 transferred into the program during the semester. Seventeen students enrolled in BLOCK classes after experiencing attendance difficulties in regular classes at Amphitheater High School. The remainder were transfers from other schools or were late enrollees to school. One late enrollee was 1/2 unit short for graduation. Enrolling in a math class during the 3rd block unit, he became a mid-year graduate. One young man had surgery in August, so enrolling in a subsequent unit of BLOCK enabled him to maintain progress toward graduation.

Fall enrollment reflects the use of BLOCK for the mobile population.

Unit 1	157 students	7 sections
Unit 2	171 students	6 sections
Unit 3	183 students	7 sections
Unit 4	192 students	6 sections

The fall figures indicated a dropout rate of 15.3%. This is higher than the dropout rate for the general student population. However, it is probably lower for this specific population than would have otherwise occurred. Second semester dropout rate was lower. Dropout rate for fall 1988 was 4.7. Of the students leaving BLOCK 6 of the 8 had received at least one credit.

Student Achievement

Some very positive achievement benefits were shown following the completion of the first semester. Students completed a much higher percentage of their BLOCK classes than they had completedthe year before. Their grade point averages were higher than those of a year before. The average number of classes completed this fall vs. last fall was also higher.

An examination of transcripts did show that the BLOCK program students completed a lower percentage of their non-block classes taken this fall than either their BLOCK schedule classes or their classes taken last fall. In spite of this, their total fall performance, in terms of percent of courses completed, number of courses completed, and grade point averages showed improvement.

The achievement of students who would be considered academically at-risk, as indicated by class failures, showed dramatic improvement. Thirty-two BLOCK program students had failed three or more classes last spring. A total of 118 classes were failed. This fall, those same students failed only 31 classes - an average of slightly less than one each.

Attendance

Attendance improvement also occurred. This was particularly true for students who had significant attendance problems the previous spring. The attendance of BLOCK program students who had accumulated at least 20 absences in at least one class last spring was compared to their attendance in their BLOCK classes. A great improvement in attendance was observed for this group of students

Parent Opinion

A November survey of parents of BLOCK program students was very positive. Parent feedback indicates a belief that attendance, motivation, grades, and communication with parents have all improved. Eighty-nine percent of parents returning a structured survey

indicate the program to be at least above average. Parent comments focus on specific benefits of the program.

At the time of the survey, several parents expressed their hope that the program would be continued next year. Others requested an expanded number of course offerings.

Student Opinion

Students are also highly supportive of the program. The following are only some of the reasons they are supportive of the program. Many students are experiencing success and experiencing increases in self-confidence. One student wrote "I'm finally getting good grades!!!" Students have noted that the reduced number of classes per day helped their concentration and reduced stress. Several commented positively about the reduced/condensed time needed for completion of a unit of credit. A more intense focus on one subject was felt to improve retention and maintain higher motivation levels. The relatively frequent changes of teachers and classroom routines were seen as positive.

Several expressed a feeling of family within their BLOCK schedule classes. Students commented that they felt the three hour BLOCK allowed teachers time to know them as individuals and for them to better know their classmates.

Student concerns were about three main areas. One was the desire to have a wider range of course offerings. Secondly, several felt more breaks should occur (breaks are left to the discretion of the teachers). Finally, class attendance was an issue to some. Several students felt too much emphasis was placed on monitoring student attendance. Others were concerned that so much was covered in a day that legitimate absences carried a severe consequence.

Teacher Opinion

Teachers support the program as well. Block teachers indicated that having only two classes per day (block plus one traditional class) allowed them to get to know their students better. The block teachers have 50 - 60 students per day compared to the normal load of 125 - 150 per day.

Non-BLOCK teachers are aware of some benefits of the BLOCK program to their situations. Since some students can be placed into the BLOCK program upon transfer or late enrollment, several teachers noticed fewer disruptions during the semester. Many non-BLOCK teachers have heard positive comments from BLOCK program students.

Instructional Practices

Teachers in the program are taking advantage of the opportunity to vary instructional methods to a greater extent than is possible in a 55 minute class. Self-reports from BLOCK and non-BLOCK teachers indicate about twice as many strategies are utilized in BLOCK classes than in traditional schedule classes.

Self-Concept

The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale was administered at the beginning of the fall semester, at the end of the fall semester, and again before the end of the spring semester. Changes in self-concept measured by this instrument were consistent with teacher observations.
Averages in the categories for the Piers-Harris administered in December were significantly higher than the fall or spring ratings.

The impact of a 14 week break between the first and the second semester of the same course on the academic progress of students was a concern. A comparison of grades and attendance between the first block class taken and the spring semester of the same course (with the 14 week break in between) resulted in the following information.

Academic progress reflects very little, if any, negative impact from the time break: 62.5% of the students did not differ in grades between the first and second semester. 15% improved upon their fall grade, and 22.5% had a lower grade in the spring semester of the course.

Absences increased for almost one half of the students, a phenomenon seen in spring vs. fall absenses. Also, many students were affected by the flu in January.

SUMMARY

Amphitheater district is fortunate in having a teacher who brought forth a very powerful, innovative idea and having teachers and administrators who were interested in making that idea a reality. The results accumulated are very positive from both objective and subjective perspectives.

A great deal of interest in continuing and expanding the pilot BLOCK program has resulted in 196 students currently enrolled in the program. BLOCK has demonstrated flexibility in meeting the needs of students and faculty. Parent support remains very positive.

The BLOCK Schedule program is not recommended as the schedule for an entire school. Alternatives should be explored to address the learning and teaching patterns of the population.

The BLOCK program is **one** way of addressing student needs. It has been exciting to watch this program develop. The success is evidence that reform in schools can be relevant and meaningful for those whom it serves.